

Message Text

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S E C R E T MOSCOW 2641

E.O. 11652 GDS

TAGS: PFOR, MILI, NATO, XF, OK, XG, SI

SUBJ: NATO STUDY ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF REOPENING THE SUEZ
CANAL

REF: USNATO 1039 AND PREVIOUS

1. WE TAKE NO EXCEPTION TO POINTS MADE IN THE VARIOUS

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NATO PAPERS ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REOPENING OF THE

SUEZ CANAL FOR THE USSR, BUT BELIEVE THAT ONE MAJOR ADDITIONAL POINT WHICH SHOULD BE FACTORED IN IS THE STRATEGIC BENEFIT WHICH THE SOVIETS WOULD PERCEIVE IN SHORTENING THE SEA ROUTE BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN AND FAR EASTERN PORTIONS OF THE U.S.S.R., PARTICULARLY THE MARITIME PROVINCES. EVEN THE FRENCH PAPER, THE ONLY ONE WHICH TOUCHES ON THIS QUESTION, DOES NOT IN OUR VIEW GIVE IT SUFFICIENT IMPORTANCE.

2. SINO-SOVIET RIVALRY, OF COURSE, REMAINS MAJOR PROBLEM FOR SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY AND SOVIET PLANNERS MUST ACCOUNT FOR A "WORST-CASE" SCENARIO IN WHICH AN OUTBREAK OF OPEN SINO-SOVIET HOSTILITIES COULD LEAD THE CHINESE TO CUT THE VULNERABLE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY. IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES, THE INDIAN OCEAN WOULD BE THE ONLY RELIABLE SUPPLY ROUTE TO THE SOVIET FAR EAST. THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS STRATEGIC QUESTION IS UNDERLINED BY MOSCOW'S DECISION TO CONSTRUCT THE BAIKAL-AMUR RAILWAY (BAM), WHICH IS BEING BUILT AT GREAT SPEED AND GREATER COST ACROSS INHOSPITABLE CENTRAL SIBERIA. WHEN THE BAM IS COMPLETED IN A FEW YEARS IT WILL NOT ONLY RELIEVE CONGESTION FROM THE PRESENT ROUTE AND OPEN UP NEW AREAS FOR RESOURCE EXPLOITATION, BUT WILL PROVIDE A MORE SECURE ROUTE FOR EMERGENCY SUPPLIES IN CASE OF CONFLICT. IN THE MEANTIME, AND EVEN AFTERWARD, THE INDIAN OCEAN WILL REMAIN THE MAJOR ROUTE FOR HIGH-VOLUME CARGOES BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN AND FAR EASTERN REGIONS OF THE USSR.

3. IN THIS CONNECTION, THE REOPENING OF THE SUEZ CANAL WILL BE OF IMMEDIATE AND OBVIOUS BENEFIT TO MOSCOW BY CUTTING THE SHIPPING DISTANCE FROM ODESSA TO VLADIVOSTOK BY MORE THAN SIX THOUSAND NAUTICAL MILES. THE SAVINGS IN TIME AND COSTS COULD THUS BE CONVERTED INTO A LARGER FLOW OF GOODS, IF THE OCCASION REQUIRED.

4. ASSUMING, AS WE DO, THAT THIS SUPPLY QUESTION IS A MAJOR SOVIET MOTIVATION FOR GETTING THE CANAL REOPENED, IT SEEMS PROBABLE THAT MOSCOW WOULD LIKE TO SEE IT STAY OPEN AND FREE FROM THE THREAT OF CLOSURE DUE TO POSSIBLE NEW HOSTILITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST. THIS FACTOR WOULD

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THEREFORE WEIGH, AT LEAST SOMEWHAT, ON THE SIDE OF SOVIET MODERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

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